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Toni Morrison, author of the national bestselling novel, *Sula* (1973) became well-defined as an author for her acute attention to a poetic aesthetic and contesting political commentary. The critics of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) recognize "the novel [as] good because it was faithful to a certain kind of politics; [and] bad [if] it was faithless to them" (Morrison xii). Morrison began writing *Sula* in 1970 with her critics' superficial duality in mind, but the question that she sought to answer in writing *Sula* mattered more than the discouraging commentary that she received. Morrison's question, "What is friendship between women when unmediated by men?" (Morrison xiii) perfectly encompasses the novel, and its central themes. In Toni Morrison's, *Sula* the character of Sula is an independent, sexually free female, and maintains this status throughout her life. However, Nel, in her adulthood, serves as a contrasting character to Sula's identity, and conforms to society's standards and patriarchal thinking of the time. Sula and Nel's differences result in betrayal and a severe consequential estrangement between them.

Throughout her life, Sula conducts herself as a dominant, autonomous female, and she obtains this identity through her childhood experiences. Sula displays this identity through her sporadic emotions, and her inability to control acting on them. Nel, on the other hand "seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula" (Morrison 53). One of the first instances that Sula shows her independence is when she slices off her fingertip with a paring knife to defend Nel against boy bullies. After, she asks the boys "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (Morrison 55). Sula acts on her emotions, not through a direct threat to the boys, but rather indirectly with self-infliction, expressing autonomy. Sula also protects Nel against the bullies because she wants to acquire Nel's strength. Nel expresses disgust toward Sula's actions and she realizes that her behavior will not make her strong like Nel. Sula discovers later in her life that her defense "[earns] not Nel's gratitude but her disgust. From then on [Sula lets] her emotions dictate her behavior" (Morrison 141). Nel's lack of gratitude only procures disappointment in the satisfaction that Sula's expression of independence brings her, so from then on, she commands her own self.

Young Nel and Sula share a desire to further define their independence as females and assist one another to fulfill this desire. Helene, Nel's mother, immediately forbids Nel from being friends with Sula because she does not like Hannah, Sula's mother. Before meeting Sula, Nel discovers herself as an independent being, and tells herself: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (Morrison 28). This discovery gives Nel a feeling of power and happiness. As a result of Nel's "new found me-ness, [it gives] her strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" (Morrison 29). When they finally become acquaintances, the narrator describes the meeting as, "[two] solitary girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream" (Morrison 51). Basically, Nel and Sula are soul mates. Their "friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personalities" (Morrison 53). Nel and Sula need one another's existence in order to fulfill their desired autonomy. Simone de Beauvior, a French writer, discusses the philosophical concept of "The Other," and the concept explains the reliance that Nel and Sula create on one another. Beauvior explains, "each individual self seeks to act freely and autonomously, but simultaneously requires interaction with others in order to define that self. Generally, individuals are forced to recognize the reciprocity of the Otherness" (qtd. in Pilcher, Whelehan 90). Nel and Sula understand this reciprocity, to the point where they metaphorically merge into a single person. Their merging is shown through the symbolism and beautiful imagery of the afternoon they lay together in the grass and, "without meeting each other's eyes, they [stroke] the blades [of grass] up and down, up and down," symbolizing recognition of sensuality. Then, they begin to "[poke their twigs] rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider" (Morrison, 58). Nel and Sula continue their digging in silence, and once the twigs break, they fill the hole with trash and replace the soil. Missy Kubitschek, in her work *Toni Morrsion: A Critical Companion* analyzes their symbolic actions: "When the sticks break down the separation between the holes, they symbolize men's refusal to make distinctions between women; that is, in the socially dominant male view, women all have the same social role. The garbage filling the holes symbolically represents the "trashing" of female identity" (Kubitschek, 66). As children, Nel and Sula share an equal understanding of their identity as a female, which provides further evidence that they speak the same language. Through their symbolic actions, they quietly exhibit a mutual understanding of their desire to live as autonomous females.

Nel and Sula's reciprocity eventually comes to an end when Nel marries Jude to become her own person. Though one of Nel's first instances of

independence happens when she disobeys her mother to become friends with Sula, she realizes that "only with Sula did [she] have free reign, but their friendship was so close that they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (Morrison 83). The narrator explains that Nel forgets about their friendship when she marries Jude, realizing this "[greater] new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (Morrison 84). Nel's marriage to Jude is the initial indication that she is conforming to the patriarchal belief of a woman as a wife and mother. Nel believes that the only way she can be her own person and feel happiness in her life is by giving herself to a man.

Nel and Sula's sisterhood ends when Nel marries Jude, because their paths in life no longer align, and consequentially, they obtain different values and beliefs as they grow separately into adulthood. Their upbringing is a direct result to their differences. During her childhood, Nel's mother, Helene, oppresses Nel and maintains a patriarchal way of thinking: "Helene values social responsibility above all else. For her, being respectable means keeping a clean house, having sex infrequently and quietly, rearing a child, and above all controlling behavior to exclude anything unconventional" (Kubitschek 66). Nel naturally conforms to this responsibility that Helene values because she is raised around these patriarchal beliefs. Sula's mother, Hannah, is the complete opposite of Helene. Hannah lives her life free of a man after the death of her husband, which procures her sexual independence. Hannah raises Sula in a male-free environment, and Sula is a witness to Hannah's free expression of sexuality. The narrator describes Hannah as beautiful and explains that men find her irresistible, and most importantly "Hannah had no passion attached to her relationships and was wholly incapable of jealousy" (Morrison 34). She rejects male dominance and gains control with her self-motivated femininity, allowing her to exhibit her sexual behavior openly. Sula first learns about the specific act of sex from her mother after she accidentally walks in on Hannah with one of her lovers:

> "Seeing [Hannah] step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise remarkable. Outside, where children giggled about underwear, the message was different. So she watched her mother's face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind" (Morrison 44).

Hannah indirectly teaches Sula about sexual behavior and the emotions that are supposed to accompany it. Judith Daniluk, in her book, *Women's Sexuality Across the Lifespan*, explains the role of the mother in the development of a child's sexual identity. She states: "Mothers are the primary purveyors of sexual information in the family. …Mothers pass their sexual values and beliefs on their daughters" (Daniluk 105). Young Sula defines sex for herself by experiencing

Hannah's behavior. The way she interprets this sexual behavior resonates with her, and later explains the sexually free and independent woman that she becomes. Sula not only adopts Hannah's attitude toward freedom of sexuality, but also her lack of compassion. Nel and Sula explore Medallion one afternoon, and they discover Hannah talking with friends. Hannah explains to her friend that she loves Sula, but she does not like her. Sula overhears this and runs away, feeling betrayed by her mother. The narrator later explains that her mother's comment teaches Sula that "there was no other that you could count on," (Morrison 118) and this explains Sula's natural desire for independence, because she could not even count on her own mother. Both Nel and Sula's upbringing explains the separate paths they take, and their identities and behaviors in adulthood.

When Sula returns to Medallion ten years after Nel and Jude's marriage, she is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (Morrison 89). Robins represent beauty and harmony, but they litter Medallion with death and encompass it with an evil aura. Like the plague of robins, Sula's return threatens the town of Medallion. She sleeps with many husbands in Medallion, threatens to rip families apart, most specifically Nel's, her closest friend. Sula visits her grandmother, Eva who attempts to talk her into settling down with a man, to which Sula wholeheartedly rejects, explaining she "[doesn't] want to make somebody else. [She wants] to make [herself]" (Morrison 92). Her retort confirms the autonomous identity that Sula maintains while away. Sula then reunites with Nel and discovers she has chosen to conform to the male dominance she rejected in childhood. At this point in the novel, Kubitschek explains,

> "Sula and Nel represent two modes of being. Nel accepts usual social roles rather than identifying and acting on her own feelings. Her opposite, Sula consults only her own feelings and disregards all community expectations. Confrontations between these ideas of how to live generate most of the rest of the plot" (52).

As a result of her marriage, Nel, who felt "talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself," (Morrison 95) will no longer understand Sula's autonomy.

Sula and Nel's friendship ends when Sula sleeps with Jude, which destroys Nel's marriage and happiness. Sula means no harm to her friend; it is simply a result of the way Sula perceives their friendship and her own sense of self. The narrator states that Sula is "distinctly different" (Morrison 118), and explains the cause of her difference:

> "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all of her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them free reign, feeling no

obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (Morrison 118).

Clearly, the women in her youth imposed a permanent effect on Sula's adulthood. She is unable to differentiate moral and immoral, because she never witnesses it in her adolescence. To reference back to Daniluk: "In the role of preparing their daughters for the realities of the adult world, [a mother's] communications frequently reflect values of the dominant culture" (105). As a result of developing in a female dominant culture, the only values that Hannah reflects are of free expression of self and sexuality on Sula. Hannah does not properly prepare Sula for the reality of the adult world. Hannah, as previously mentioned, lacks compassion for her child. Hannah's lasting effect causes Sula to hurt the person who meant most to her with indifference. The narrator reveals that Hannah's lack of compassion results in Sula feeling as if she has, "…no center, no speck around which to grow. She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property of things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego" (Morrison 119). Sula sleeping with Jude explains her identity as a direct result of her upbringing. Another reason that Sula sleeps with Jude is because she does not understand monogamy, specifically when it comes to Nel. Sula is "surprised a little and saddened a great deal" (Morrison 120) by Nel's negative reaction, because "they always shared the affection of other people" (Morrison 119). The narrator explains why Sula's upbringing also causes her misunderstanding of monogamy: "Having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to" (Morrison 119). Hannah raises Sula to understand expression of sexuality as free, and having grown in the opposite direction that Nel does, she feels comfortable sleeping with Jude. Even after Nel catches them, Sula "was sitting on the bed not even bothering to put on her clothes because actually she didn't need to because somehow she didn't look naked to [Nel]" (Morrison 106). From the very moment it happens, Sula remains comfortable. While Sula's immoral actions are not justified, the narrator helps the reader understand why Sula feels indifferent toward betraying Nel, and why her selfish action is a direct cause of her upbringing.

Nel and Sula become estranged, but this was expected the moment that Nel marries Jude, because she would no longer share the reciprocity of the 'otherness' that they shared as children. Nel cannot understand why Sula sleeps with her husband because they chose to take different paths, though Nel misses her companion expressing, "Sula would say something funny to make it right. …To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk to about it because it was Sula that he had left her for" (Morrison 110). Sula's response to Nel's rejection essentially

manifests her identity, and that identity is a direct result of her upbringing and childhood experiences. Nel's reaction manifests society and patriarchal thinking during that time. Nel represents Medallion's reasons for identifying Sula as a Pariah as a result of her open sexual behavior. The response we see from the town is a result of fear of what Sula threatens. The narrator appears reliable throughout the story, so the reader trusts the narrator when they describe their reactions to Sula's behavior. But, what is interesting is that when Sula betrays Nel, Morrison switches the point of view. The entire novel is told in third person omniscient, but for four brief paragraphs following Nel's discovery of Jude and Sula, Morrison switches to dramatic first person point of view from Nel. This technique allows the reader to get inside of Nel's head, and feel sympathy for her, momentarily turning the reader against Sula, joining the town of Medallion. The vivid imagery she uses is so realistic and penetrating, the reader feels Nel's pain deeply, and personally, and this is only achieved through the use of first person point of view. So, because the reader becomes first person witness to Nel's pain that Sula causes, they are able to understand why the town of Medallion reacts to Sula the way they do. If Morrison stayed in third person omniscient, it would not have given Medallion a reason to condemn Sula a Pariah, and it would not have helped the reader understand their reasoning.

Sula dies alone as the Pariah of her hometown, without her best friend, and with nothing to show for her life. However, she dies completely content with her past behaviors and satisfied with her autonomous identity; her name is Sula Peace, after all. Nel goes on to live her life similarly alone, though, in contrast, is not content in the way that Sula is, a direct result of her conformity to society. Kubitschek explains,

> "…[Nel] uses her children to compensate her for the losses of Jude and Sula, and for the loss of her sexuality. Her love for her children becomes ugly, perverse, even dangerous to them, ''a cumbersome bearlove that, given any rein, would suck their breath away in its crying need for honey'' (138). Although Nel pretends to live for her children, she is simply refusing to live her own life and claiming theirs instead. Nel considers herself, however, a model of unselfishness, and the community agrees. And, the community reasons, if Nel's behavior is good, then Sula's actions and Sula herself must be selfish and bad" (62).

Nel becomes just as selfish as Sula, but all on her own, with no justification of her upbringing. She seeks anyone to fill the emptiness that she feels, but she realizes that no one will and ultimately, ends up just as alone as Sula. Nel and Sula's final words allow the reader to understand Nel's conformity and why she becomes lonely. When Nel visits Sula at her deathbed, she tells her: "You can't be walking around all independent like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want,

leaving what you don't" (Morrison 142). Nel ignorantly defends the patriarchy as result of her experience. Nel believes she was happier as a wife, because when Jude leaves, her life falls apart. Therefore, she makes Jude the reason for her happiness. Ann Oakley in her text *Sex, Gender, and Society* (1972) explains this patriarchal way of thinking by,

> "…how Western cultures seem most prone to the exaggeration of gender differences and argues that the "social efficiency" of our present gender roles centres round women's role as housewife and mother. There is also the more vaguely conceived belief that tampering with these roles would diminish happiness" (qtd. in Pilcher, Whelehan, 56).

The exaggeration of gender differences results from the Patriarchal thinking that the biological differences between men and women brought along. Men maintained power through this way of thinking. This led to women conforming to domestication and obliging to their reproductive design, forcing them into their inevitable motherhood as a way to bring happiness and harmony to their oppressed lives. Consequentially, this ignorant belief only oppresses women further because the masculine figure in their lives blind them to believe this as their only option for happiness. Sula explains to Nel that she understands what her life is like, but that she's different than her because she is not "dying like a stump… [She is] going down like one of those redwoods. [She] sure did live in this world" (Morrison 143). Nel tells Sula that she has nothing to show for her life, but Sula defends herself and says: "Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me. …My lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. …A secondhand lonely" (Morrison 143). Sula uses symbolism when she calls herself a redwood, to explain her satisfaction of her long-lived life, and sees Nel, and all of the others who conform to marriage and motherhood as only a stump. Sula never wishes to belong to someone else, because that is not the identity she maintains. Though, through all of Sula's threatening sexual behaviors, all she sought was the reciprocity she found with Nel during their childhood. The narrator explains that while Sula is away from Medallion,

> "…she had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade, and could never be—for a woman. … Her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. And like any artists with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison 121).

Sula finds no man who compares to the type of reciprocity she shares with a woman because during that time, the patriarchal belief prevents males from understanding reciprocity of the woman as 'the Other'. Following her explanation of the concept of the Other, De Beauvior explains that,

> "…in the cause of women and men, this reciprocity of Otherness is not recognized. Instead, 'one of the contrasting terms [men] is set up as the sole essential, denying any relatively in regard to its correlate and defining the latter [women] as pure otherness" (qtd. in Pilcher, Whelehan 90).

Sula confirms her longing desire for the equal 'otherness' with her dying words: "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (Morrison 149). Even when Nel leaves Sula for the final time, her dying wish was to share her last experience of life with Nel, the only person she shared equality withi in her life.

After Sula's death, Nel visits Eva and discovers that no matter how hard she tries to reject Sula because of the immoral things she has done, Eva reminds her that they will always remain one in the same. Later, Nel visits Sula's grave and realizes: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. …We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl""(Morrison 174). Kubitschek explains Nel's "cry of grief for Sula" as an, "understanding [of] what Sula's death has meant to her [and her understanding] completes Nel's growth because it restores her to an authentic, honest life of feeling" (53). Young Nel and Sula begin their friendship and quickly find themselves one in the same, but just as quickly they are torn apart during adulthood as consequence to their differences in upbringing, conformity to patriarchal belief, and the separate paths they take in life. Nel, who conforms, no longer understands Sula's desire for freedom, and renounces their friendship. But, in the end, Nel grasps the reason for the differences between them, and understands the reason for Sula's betrayal, because they "was girls together," (Morrison 174).

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